

Dedicated to Art: The Half Dozen Group of Artists

AN EXAMINATION OF THE HISTORY OF THIS SMALL BUT SIGNIFICANT ARTISTS' GROUP BY PHD CANDIDATE JUDY HAMILTON

On the night of 9 April 1941, four people met in the attic rooms of the Royal Queensland Art Society (RQAS) at Harris Court, high above George Street in Brisbane.¹ Although the group began as a breakaway from the RQAS, the real purpose was 'to enlarge and add to the art interests of Brisbane'.² Six artists had expressed interest and although Ann Ross and Leonard Shillam could not be there, E Lilian Pedersen, Mona Elliott, Frank Sherrin, and Rosalie Wilson set the aims and objectives for the new group, including that its membership would be limited to professional artists. They called themselves the Half Dozen Group of Artists (HDG) and adopted six seedling oak trees, symbolising strength and future growth, as their insignia. Dr JV Duhig, Mrs Prudence E Allen and central Queensland grazier, Mr CG Loch, agreed to be the first Patrons. Vice-Regal patronage was secured in 1946, a proud tradition that is maintained to the present day.

The six artists who formed the HDG were an unlikely combination to create an artists' group. Of the founders, Mona Elliott (still life) and Frank Sherrin (landscape) were painters; Rosalie Wilson was skilled in needlework, creating original designs using Aboriginal and wartime motifs; Pedersen showed book illuminations, but she was also a book binder, hand weaver and an accomplished painter; Ann Ross showed modernist decorative mural panels; while Leonard Shillam exhibited a semi-abstract sculpture.³ This eclectic membership mix was soon joined by LJ Harvey, a noted woodcarver and potter, as well as by painters James Wieneke and Doreen Harris. The Queensland National Art Gallery supported their first show, purchasing drawings by Lloyd Rees (their guest artist), and Pedersen's illumination of the poem, 'Black Swans'.⁴

A bank deposit for £2/12/6 representing five memberships set the HDG resolutely on its way. Regular income, it was anticipated, would come from memberships, commission on sales, and donations. Total income for the first year was £235/0/8 and outgoings, including a substantial donation of £67/2/9 to the Red Cross, were £215/12/8 leaving them with a credit balance at the end of their first year of operation of £19/8/-. In 1943, with only £55/18/8 in the bank, the HDG nevertheless launched the first of its scholarship schemes for young artists. The 'Half Dozen Group of Artists Junior Art Scholarship' was valued at £25 to provide 'one year's tuition with a recognised art teacher' for an art student up to the age of twenty.⁵ A further £10 would be added to allow for the purchase of art materials required. The scholarship was a very practical initiative in encouraging junior artists to follow their artistic ambitions at a time when no incentives existed. A more substantial scholarship followed in 1944 when the HDG was offered the use of the remaining Queensland Wattle League scholarship funds.⁶

The new scholarship was known as the 'Half Dozen Group of Artists (Incorporating the Queensland Wattle League) Travelling Scholarship for Landscape', and was valued at £150. The scholarship was of twelve months' duration and aimed to allow recipients to travel to study art. Among the early beneficiaries was Margaret Cilento, who won the first scholarship in 1946. Cilento travelled to New York to study in the art capital of the world, and in her reports back to the group, mentioned that she was working with 'a group of abstract painters' including Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Robert Motherwell; an experience she found 'very stimulating'.⁷ Cilento exhibited engravings in the new 'expressionism' style at the 1947 HDG exhibition; later these were gifted to the Queensland National Art Gallery, and the Teachers' College Collection at Kelvin Grove.⁸ Betty Quelhurst, who won in 1949, chose to use the scholarship to extend her study at the National Gallery Art School.⁹ In a cultural climate where the arts were given no official support, the provision of these scholarships by the HDG made, in the words of Quelhurst, 'the path of the art student easier' in Queensland. In addition to the scholarships, in 1951 the HDG established, and funded, a biennial drawing prize: the 'L. J. Harvey Memorial Prize for Drawing'. LJ Harvey had been a stalwart member of both the HDG

Below: Letterhead paper, showing the six seedling oak trees, adopted by the Half Dozen Group as their insignia. UQFL64, Box 6, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland





and the RQAS who died in tragic circumstances in 1949. The Harvey prize was administered by the Queensland Art Gallery until 1987.¹⁰ The HDG continued to encourage young artists in Queensland by awarding travelling scholarships and bursaries, such as that for the College of Art, until 1974.

Over its seventy-two-year history, the HDG has continued to function as an exhibiting group and since it found a permanent home in 1975 in the basement studio at St Mary's Anglican Church in Kangaroo Point, it has offered tutored and untutored workshops to its members. The studio at St Mary's had been used by artists in Brisbane from 1942, when Donald Friend set up a studio. Throughout the 1950s, the studio was the centre of Brisbane's alternative art culture, providing contemporary artist training as an alternative to the academic teaching of the Central Technical College. In the 1960s, it became the headquarters of the Contemporary Art Society (Queensland Branch). The HDG secured the lease in 1975, and inaugurated a programme of weekly workshops centred on life drawing. The group acknowledges that these untutored workshops form the thread that has held the group together through the years.¹¹ Valerie Waring convened the first life drawing workshops at the studio in February 1975, and she continues to lead life drawing sessions in 2013.

The basement studio has also provided the group with one of its most potent symbols of creativity—the 'Paint Tree'. The Paint Tree was an oil-paint-encrusted support column inside the studio. The practice of scraping unused paint from palettes at the end of a session had begun in 1951, when students offered the paint as a mark of respect for themselves as artists, and for their artist-teachers.¹² Over the years, the tradition continued and the paint accumulated. When the studio was finally closed in 2010, the HDG carefully oversaw the removal of the encrustation and transferred it to canvas. It is now an icon of Brisbane's art history and the HDG is its guardian.

The HDG is a group for practising artists and for four days each week, the members get on with the business of creating art at their studio at Montrose Access in Corinda. While the human figure is central to their studies, they organise regular outdoor painting sessions including 'Paint-Out' weekends. The annual members' exhibition is still the focus of the members' year, but it is complemented by a number of 'Folio Shows' where works are sold mounted, but unframed, from the studio. In 2011, another layer was added to their activities with the introduction of the Lilian Pedersen Lecture to the December programme. Emeritus Professor RD Milns AM delivered the inaugural lecture titled 'The Importance of Place'.

Above: Lilian Pedersen (left) and Mona Elliott (right) with items from the first Half Dozen Group exhibition, 1941. UQFL64, Box 6, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library

Spring Invades Art Exhibition

Touches of spring were the keynote yesterday at the opening of the Half Dozen Group Art Exhibition held in aid of the Red Cross at the City Hall Art Gallery.

Bowls of real flowers, the bright flower paintings, the hand loom weavings, and the spring and summer frocks and poses of the women visitors all provided a touch of spring to the gallery.

Lady Wilson, who accompanied the Governor (Sir Leslie Wilson), set the example for spring frocks with her ensemble of waterfall green featuring openwork embroidery on the skirt and sleeves of the coat. Her large-brimmed hat of navy chip straw displayed a feather trim.

Mrs. Mona Elliott's frock of earth-brown cloque was self-embossed and was relieved by a spray of tulips. She added a fawn felt hat. A conventional design in white and tawny shades patterned the vest worn by Mrs. L. Lilian Pedersen under a loose-sleeved frock of dark brown jersey. She favoured a brown felt hat.

Mrs. J. V. Duhig favoured a white hat with her frock of navy and white monotone sheer. Cherry red was the colour chosen by Mrs. A. E. Fowles, who added a posy of sweetpeas to harmonise.

Flowers patterned the white jacket worn by Miss Vida Lahey with an Air Force blue skirt and a burgundy hat. Black jersey was favoured by Mrs. John Cooper. The skirt of the frock featured unpressed pleats and she added a small black hat.

A kietind Viennese suit in mist pink and worn with a navy blue sports hat was favoured by Mrs. Swinton Nicholson. A spray of blue natural flowers was pinned to the shoulderline of the tartan frock in burgundy and blue tonings worn by Mrs. L. Williams. She added a burgundy upturned beret.

Others present included Mrs. R. S. McGeoch, Misses Eva and Jean Watt, Mrs. Rees, sen., Mrs. Hector Williams, Mrs. L. J. Harvey, Miss Rita Humphreys, and Miss Jenettie Sheldon.

Governor Opens Art Show



The Governor (Sir Leslie Wilson) and Lady Wilson admiring the work of the artists of the Half-Dozen Group, whose exhibition he officially opened in the City Hall gallery. Also in the picture are Mrs. L. Pedersen (left) and Mrs. Mona Elliott (second from right).

The group began because Pedersen felt that Brisbane, with a population of around 350 000, was large enough to support another exhibiting artists' group, but in 1972 she was forced to concede that art societies and groups were disappearing from Brisbane's cultural landscape as a sign of the tough cultural times. However, the HDG survived.

Many of the facilities enjoyed by art lovers in Brisbane developed because artists' groups such as the HDG were committed to improving the lot of the visual arts in the city. The HDG still sees its purpose as providing a stronghold for 'aspirations with a common bond of dedication to the arts' that will strengthen Brisbane's cultural heritage into the future.¹³

REFERENCES

1. Minute Book, HDG Archive, UQFL64, Box 5, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.
2. Lilian Pedersen, Letter to Elwyn Flint [1951?], HDG Archive, UQFL64, Box 6, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.
3. 'Half Dozen Group Art Exhibition', *The Telegraph* [Brisbane], 4 September 1941, HDG Archive, UQFL64, Box 6, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.
4. "'Half Dozen Group' Pictures Bought for National Gallery", *Courier-Mail*, 13 September 1941, p. 7.
5. Minute Book, 15 December 1943, HDG Archive, UQFL64, Box 5, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.

6. The Queensland Wattle League was a women's philanthropic organisation founded in 1912. Although the focus of the League was not art, it offered travelling scholarships to allow artists to do further study. Daphne Mayo won in 1914 and R Cummings, who would later fill the Chair of Architecture at The University of Queensland, won the scholarship in 1924.
7. Margaret Cilento, letter to Lilian Pedersen, 12 April 1949, HDG Archive, UQFL64, Box 2, Folder 3, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.
8. *ibid.*
9. Quelhurst was studying art as part of the Commonwealth Repatriation Scheme for returned servicemen and women. The scholarship allowed her to complete the three-year course and made her eligible for scholarships offered by the National Gallery Art School. Letter to Lilian Pedersen, 18 February 1949, HDG Archive, UQFL64, Box 2, Folder 2, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.
10. 49th HDG Exhibition Catalogue, HDG Archive, UQFL64, Box 2, Folder 3, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library.
11. *Newsletter*, vol. 17, no. 4, August 2012, p. 2.
12. M Shaw, 'The Kangaroo Point Mentors and the Paint Tree' [unpublished essay], HDG Archive, UQFL64, Box 6, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library; Shaw, *The Kangaroo Point mentors and the Paint Tree: a short history of a Brisbane studio at Kangaroo Point in the 50's and 60's as remembered by some of the students*, Half Dozen Group of Artists Inc., [Brisbane], 2004.
13. W Allen, 'President's maiden speech', *Newsletter*, vol. 15, no. 5, October 2010, p. 3.

JUDY HAMILTON is a PhD candidate in the School of English, Media Studies and Art History at The University of Queensland, examining the role of Brisbane's artists' groups in the wider context of the Brisbane art world. She has been involved in the 'art world' all her life as a teacher, an artist, a scholar, and a community art worker.

Above: Opening of Half Dozen Group exhibition, *The Telegraph*, 5 September 1941, p. 3. UQFL64, Box 6, Fryer Library, The University of Queensland Library